How I Survived a Midair

by LCdr. Kevin L. Duggan

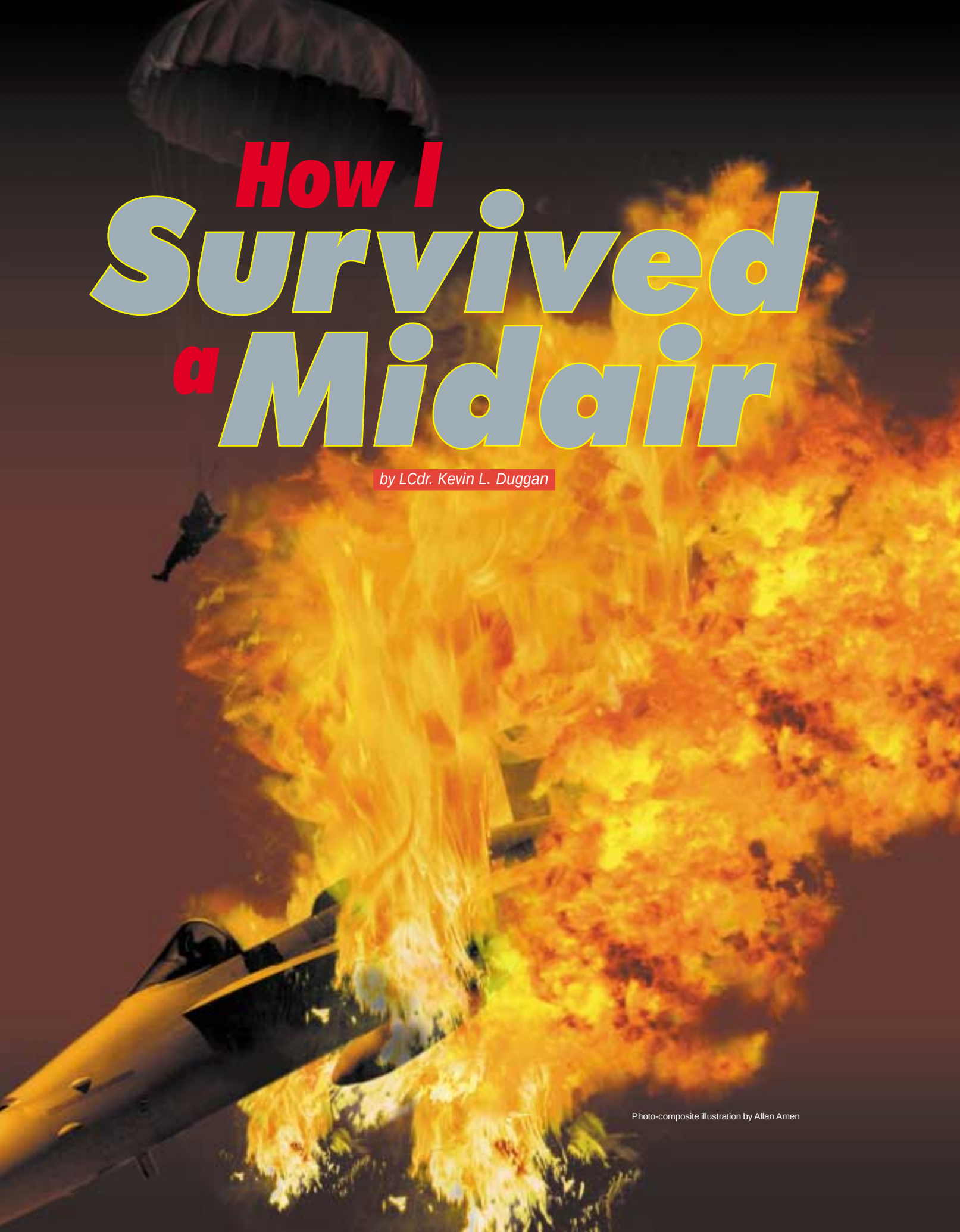

Photo-composite illustration by Allan Amen

Three and a half years have passed, but it seems like yesterday: briefing an SFARP division self-escort hop into B-17, then walking out of the hangar. Minimal bogeys, TACTS control, pinky launch. A beautiful day had given way to one of those crisp, high-desert evenings in January. The temperature drops fast in the desert, and I remember thinking, "I should have on a dry-suit liner," as I watched the sunset.

An hour later and less than three minutes into our run, I pulled the handle. It didn't take a lot of thought, and it felt like a car wreck. Dash 2 and Dash 4 pulled away, temporarily blinded by the fireball from my midair. Plane captains on the ramp, 60 miles away, said they saw an orange glow on the horizon. Dash 3 died in the blink of an eye. I survived.

Survivor's guilt is real, even when everybody tells you it isn't your fault. I could have done a thousand things differently, and I don't have the time or space here to explain all the factors leading to the midair. But I can pass on some do-as-I-say-not-as-I-did thoughts on survival.

All I knew after pulling the handle was that I was alive. I saw wreckage falling away. Things seemed surreal: the seat and I stabilized, descended and separated. The opening shock was intense. Some long-ago training took over as I looked up at the canopy, and I pulled the beaded handles inflating my LPU. I pulled off my oxygen mask and raised the clear visor, which had snapped down with the opening shock of the parachute.

Then I panicked. I wasn't prepared for the anxiety associated with a sudden, unexpected ejection. At 12,000 feet, the most important thing in the world to me was to talk to somebody, to tell anybody that I was alive. The feeling was overpowering. I wrestled my PRC-90 from its pocket and fumbled with it in the dark. Then I unsnapped the flashlight that, amazingly, was still with me. With the light, I could see my breath and the radio. I realized I should get ready for landing. Looking down at the darkness, I suddenly became terrified that I was going to lose the flashlight, even though I had another in my vest.

As I tried to secure the flashlight in my G-suit pocket with my numb hands, I fumbled the radio. As it fell, I remember not being too concerned because I figured it was tied to my vest. It wasn't. In the Gulf, we had to switch between PRC-90s and PRC-112s, depending on our mission. I'd never secured it since I'd gotten back home.

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I slammed into the desert floor but quickly hopped up and determined I wasn't seriously injured (Adrenaline is a wonderful thing—I could barely move the next day). After several minutes, I got the strobe light going. Dash 2 said it seemed like an eternity before he saw the strobe but that it was easily visible from 15,000 feet. I soon saw and heard him flying overhead. I secured the strobe because the combination of it and the snow was disorienting. I fired off a number of pencil flares for good measure.

A T-34 showed up several minutes later, and I fired off more pencil flares. I started to calm down, and with the decrease of adrenaline, I realized how cold I was. I inflated my raft and tried to sit on it to stay out of the snow. I lit a fire and sat by it until the helicopter arrived. Our CAG flight surgeon was a welcome sight.

I didn't do a great job surviving the mishap. I did a number of things wrong and a few things right. I had pulled the handle quickly; the first rule of being a survivor is "Know when to go." Here are the things that I could have done better.

First of all, dress correctly, and know your gear. I left a jet at 18,000 feet and 380 knots in January over Dixie Valley, wearing a flight suit, gloves, T-shirt, briefs, cotton socks and summer boots. Besides leaving my liner in the PR shop, I also left a watch cap and some chemical hand-warmers there as well. Why? I had been both lazy and rushed. Our squadron had just returned from deployment in early October. In the Gulf, I had taken out the watch cap and the hand-warmers, and I hadn't bothered to put them back into my survival vest. I simply had forgotten the liner. I had worn it on my previous night hop and on at least one day hop, but this time we'd had a long and involved brief, and I had walked late. Plain socks and summer boots—chalk them up to laziness and the supply system.

The result was that I spent an hour and 45 minutes on the ground, waiting for the helicopter, in 2 to 3 inches of snow, with the temperature in the teens, in the same outfit I wear flying in the summer.

I arrived on the ground without a scratch and was able to start a fire. I had matches in my vest but couldn't use them because my fingers were too numb. Instead, I got a fire going, using a night flare and sagebrush. If I hadn't been able to start that fire because I'd been injured, or if the helicopter rescue had been delayed, I could have suffered a bad case of hypothermia or frozen to death.

Dash 2 and the T-34 spotter found me because of my flares and strobe. They were trying to talk to me. Had the weather been worse, my poor preflight of my gear could have put my survival at risk. Later that night, a storm blew in and dropped a couple more inches of snow. A low undercast would have obscured my flares, causing the rescue effort to take hours longer, or even days.

You have to be mentally prepared. I had often played little survival scenarios in my head. My wife long ago got sick of hearing me say, "Wow, can you imagine coming down here in a parachute?" when we were on the ski slopes or driving past fields covered with grapevine stakes. But in hindsight, even these few thoughts of survival were too little, and I was ill-prepared for an actual survival situation. I was particularly unprepared for the anxiety associated with disaster and immediately after ejection. I had memorized IROK, but I hadn't thought about how clearly I'd be thinking when I needed it.

The next several weeks were among the toughest of my life. Before this accident, I had never been anywhere near a Class A mishap, much less one involving a fatality. Surviving a mishap makes you acutely aware of the human aspect, both in the cause of mishaps and their cost.

Now and then, I stand in front of a ready room and discuss my midair. Even though some of my mistakes can seem comical, the mood is always somber at the end. In a way, I'm marked for life as a guy who survived a midair that should have killed him. Pilots looking at a survivor are forced to consider the possibility of being one themselves. I hope I help them be prepared, because when it happens, it's too late to prepare.

[Midair collisions are the second leading cause of fatal mishaps, right behind CFIT. Both are overwhelmingly caused by human factors.—Ed.]

LCdr. Duggan flies with VFA-147.